Civic Engagement in American Democracy

From Civic Engagement in American Democracy by Theda Skocpal and Morris P. Fiorina

Making Sense of the Civic Engagement Debate

What is happening to American democracy? Scholars, public commentators, and thoughtful citizens alike are puzzling about the health of civic life in the United States. High-level commissions have issued reports with dire diagnoses and recommendations for amelioration, even as scholars publish articles and books by the dozens.[1] This ferment responds to a dizzying array of contradictory changes in recent decades, some of which have clearly enhanced democracy while others undercut our shared public life. For democracy in America, this may be, at once, the best and most worrisome of times.

The Civil Rights movement triumphed in the 1960s, ensuring that the promise of equality built into the Constitution was, by law, finally made good for everyone. African Americans struggled for and won basic rights, including the ability to register and vote in all parts of the country. In the wake of the momentous Civil Rights Movement, other formerly marginalized groups--feminists, the poor, homosexuals, the disabled--also raised their voices. More than ever before, the world's first mass democracy for white men became a nation where citizens of all colors and both genders could take part, where formerly excluded groups could speak up.

The tenor of national politics has also changed. "Public interest" groups have proliferated, not only groups advocating the rights of the formerly marginalized, but also groups speaking for broad causes such as environmentalism and other understandings of what is good for society as a whole.[2] Many observers find such transformations heartening. In their view, the United States has moved away from a politics of narrow interest group maneuvers toward a more inclusive and pluralist debate about the public good. Civil society, the network of ties and groups through which people connect to one another and get drawn into community and political affairs, may simply be "reinventing" itself.[3]

But is this the whole story? Even as more voices speak up on behalf of social rights and broad conceptions of the public interest, millions of Americans seem to be drawing back from involvements with community affairs and politics. Most prominently, voting rates have dropped about 25 percent since the 1960s. Moreover, the proportion of Americans who tell pollsters that they "trust the federal government to do what is right" has plummeted from three-quarters in the early 1960s to less than a third at the turn of the twenty-first century. American civil society may also be weakening. Many commentators point to an erosion in "those forms of communal and

associational life which are organized neither by the self-interest of the market nor by the coercive potential of the state."[4] Americans are participating less in many kinds of shared endeavors, from unions and political parties to religious groups and other sorts of voluntary membership organizations.[5]

Of course, some people are very active. But this may mean that small cadres push extreme or narrow causes, framing an overall public debate only tangentially relevant to the values and concerns of most citizens--who then pull further and further back from politics and community affairs.[6] Everyday Americans are increasingly mere spectators of public affairs. Much of the time they are benignly disinterested observers; at other moments angry or cynical. Either way, ordinary citizens have less and less involvement in shaping our common affairs--and, arguably, dwindling leverage over powerful leaders and institutions. Who knows what might happen if times turn bad and America's leaders need active support for decisive steps to cope with social problems?

The Roots of an Intellectual Agenda

It is vital that we make sense of what is happening to American democracy and why--so say commentators across the partisan spectrum, ranging from William Bennett and George Will on the right to Michael Sandel and Robert Kuttner on the left. So say scholars of otherwise divergent theoretical and methodological persuasions. A surprisingly wide array of people agree that we need to dissect recent transformations in American democracy.

Many also want to find ways to do something about disturbing developments. Today's debate about civic engagement attracts both analysts and activists--in fact tends to blur the lines between them. For the first time since the 1960s, mainstream academics are talking openly about social reforms, not just analyzing trends from an olympian, detached standpoint. What Senator Bill Bradley calls the challenge of revitalizing our national community engages considerable scholarly energy these days.[7]

Americans of many persuasions agree that troubles for our democracy may lie in a loss of social ties or in the changing universe of voluntary associations. Observers suspect that solutions to current ills may involve rebuilding group life beyond as well as within formal politics. When people of different partisan or theoretical positions converge--not only on questions, but also on a sense of where the answers might lie--a new "agenda" is born. This has happened in today's debate about civic engagement in American democracy.

Several not mutually exclusive considerations help to explain why such a wide array of scholars and pundits have been drawn into the civic engagement debate--and also why so many Americans are paying attention. Several trends--disillusionment with U.S. government, innovations in the

world of scholarship, and nostalgia for older folkways in an era of unsettling transformations--have led people to examine America's civic health more closely.

Ironically, worries about the federal government explain the attraction for conservatives and liberals alike--although each group certainly has its own take on the civic debate and hopes to push the discussion in a congenial direction. In the 1960s, the federal government declared a "War on Poverty" and undertook to prod improvements in race relations. Correctly or not, many Americans believe problems in these areas have gotten worse, not better. Our national government appears to have bitten off much more than it could chew, and many conservatives and liberals are focusing instead on extragovernmental forms of activity.

Some ideologues on the right would prefer to have unfettered markets solve all social problems, but there are also "civic conservatives" who hope that families, churches, and voluntary groups at the local level can address social ills more effectively than "big government" or "the welfare state."[8] Many civic conservatives are interested in revitalizing local voluntary groups because they see them as an alternative to national government activities.[9]

Liberals, meanwhile, sense that increases in federal spending or regulation will be hard to legislate in an era of tax revolts, budget pressures, and festering distrust of government. Liberals are likely to think of civic group activities in relation to government and as the groundwork for widespread and meaningful participation in politics. They look for social welfare policies that work through partnerships between civil society and government. Many on the left also hope for a revival of populist organizations and social movements "from below," viewing the revitalization of civil society as a possible way to energize democratic politics and empower ordinary people.[10]

Happenings in academia have also fueled broad interest and lively debate about the health of American civil society and democracy. "Academic scribblers" are often dismissed as irrelevant, and certainly it is harder for intellectuals to have an impact on public policy in the United States than in many other industrial democracies. Nevertheless, writings by a major sociologist and a leading political scientist have combined to spark broad scholarly participation in the current civic engagement debate. James Coleman was a sociologist who regularly addressed controversial public issues about schools and families. As a social theorist, Coleman built conceptual bridges between the individualistic, market-oriented thinking of economists and sociologists' concern with social networks, norms, and values.[11] He deployed the concept of "social capital" to point to ways in which social ties and shared norms can enhance economic efficiency and help individuals to become better educated, find jobs, amass economic capital, raise well-socialized children, and make careers.[12] Coleman led the way in convincing economists–arguably the most powerful social scientists--that they should pay attention to social ties and culture.

Then political scientist Robert Putnam came along with a 1993 book, Making Democracy Work, that married aspects of Coleman's "social capital" theory to propositions about voluntary associations taken from Alexis de Tocqueville.[13] Putnam used his version of "social capital" to explain effective democratic governance in Italy. Tracing what happened after new forms of regional governance were legislated, Putnam found that institutions similar on paper worked very differently in different regions of Italy, depending on the degree to which each region had a rich array of voluntary social groups.[14] Regions with lots of associations had more effective governing arrangements, Putnam argued. Even groups apparently remote from politics, such as choral societies, enhanced effective governance.

Because his study of Italy portrayed social capital as deeply rooted in history--Putnam traced Italian regional differences all the way back to the thirteenth century--some were surprised when, a couple of years later, Putnam published "Bowling Alone," in which he argued that social capital has sharply eroded in the United States.[15] According to "Bowling Alone," the United States, long a democracy noted for high levels of civic engagement, has experienced a sharp downward spiral of social capital in the late twentieth century. Social capital might not necessarily be so persistent. Americans in the late twentieth century are increasingly going it alone, Putnam argued, rather than cohering in groups such as bowling leagues, or churches, or unions, or civic associations. Putnam has amassed a formidable array of social statistics to document declines in group involvements since the 1950s and 1960s.[16] In his view, the troubles of U.S. democracy and governance are attributable to declining social trust and the unraveling of social connections.

"Bowling Alone" and subsequent writings by Robert Putnam have sparked much discussion within academia and beyond. Although many scholars differ with Putnam on empirical or theoretical grounds, legions of academics have nevertheless been happy to leap into the fray.[17] Scholars agree that Putnam has raised important questions about social and political change in America.

Beyond academia, not just "Bowling Alone" but other retrospections on declining community such as Alan Ehrenhalt The Lost City have been widely featured in the mass media, indicating a cultural preoccupation with issues of civic health.[18] Indeed, popular yearnings may be even more decisive than intellectual conclusions, which will take a while to gel. Many Americans long for "the good old days"--even if renditions of the imagined past do not always line up with one another, let alone with the facts.

The 1980s was a time of economic anxiety, as giant corporations downsized and new technologies came on line, reducing people's certainty about lifetime careers. Everyone in the work force seems to be working harder, even as many strata of Americans feel they are falling behind in a roaring consumerist culture.[19] In the wake of the feminist movement and the entry of more and more wives

and mothers into the paid labor force, men and women find themselves in new relationships, fraught with tensions. In the mass media age, children and parents often seem to be on different wavelengths. New waves of immigration and changing race relationships call old cultural and political certainties into question, while economic gaps have widened, even in periods of growth, between the most privileged Americans and all others.[20]

Amidst so many unsettling transformations, real or perceived, is it any wonder that social critics resonate when they contrast current social unravelings to an apparently simpler, more stable, and more sociable time in the past? Ehrenhalt, Putnam, Joyce and Schambra, and many other commentators who stress lost community bring to mind a half-remembered era in America--a time when bowling leagues met regularly and people sat on their porches or played bridge; a time when wives organized dinner parties and neighbors threw themselves into all kinds of community activities.[21] Who exactly did all of these things, how regularly, and at what cost is subject to investigation and debate. But the sense that the American past might have been better, more reassuring, is widespread--and understandable. More than mere "theory" or "data" is at stake in discussions of what is happening to civic engagement in America. Despite all of the progress in our economy and culture, there may be good things we Americans have lost. Even if we cannot turn back the tides of time, we can still remember and seek old advantages in new ways.

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1. Scholarly works are cited throughout. For two recent commission reports, see Council on Civil Society (1998) and National Commission on Civic Renewal (1998).
2. Berry (1977); Berry (1997, pp. 29-34); Minkoff (1995); McFarland (1984); Dunlap and Mertig (1992); Pettinico (1996); and Walker (1991).
3 Able arguments along these lines can be found in Dionne (1998); Ladd (1999); Schudson (1996); Stengel (1996); and Wuthnow (1998); and in Jeffrey Berry's contribution to this volume.
4. Wolfe (1998, p. 17).
5. Galston and Levine (1998); Putnam (1995a).
6. For a variety of arguments indicating such possibilities, see Ganz (1994); King (1997); Judis (1992); Rauch (1998); and Skerry (1997).
7. Bradley (1998).
8. Starobin (1997).
9. For an unadulterated statement from this perspective, see Joyce and Schambra (1996).
10. Weir and Ganz (1997).
11. Foundations of Social Theory (Coleman 1990) is his major theoretical work.
12. Coleman (1988).
13. Tocqueville ([1835-40] 1969); Putnam (1993a).
14. For the cogent critical engagements with Putnam (1993a) thesis, see Levi (1996) and Tarrow (1996).
15. Putnam (1995a).
16. In addition to Putnam (1995a) and (1995b), see Putnam (2000, forthcoming).
17. For a range of views, see Dionne (1998); Galston and Levine (1998); Ladd (1999); and Nye, Zelikow, and King (1997).
18. Ehrenhalt (1996).
19. Schor (1992, 1998).
20. Danziger and Gottschalk (1995).
21. Ehrenhalt (1996); Putnam (1995a, 1995b); Joyce and Schambra (1996).